



## A Comparative Study of Contemporary Chinese and Western Art Criticism Concepts From a Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Received 10 February 2019; accepted 23 May 2019  
 Published online 26 June 2019

### Abstract

Art criticism is not only the interpretation, but also the vane guiding contemporary art creation. Especially in the pattern of artistic creation influenced by contemporary pluralistic ideological trends, the value and function of criticism have been paid more and more attention. From the perspective of cross-cultural research, this paper makes a comparative study of the values of contemporary Chinese and western art criticism from three aspects: the picture and text of criticism, subjectivity and modernity, in order to explore the construction of a text paradigm suitable for the current context of Chinese art criticism in the review and reflection of the academic system of contemporary Chinese art criticism.

**Key words:** Art criticism; Picture and texts; Subjectivity; Modernity

Jia, F. (2019). A Comparative Study of Contemporary Chinese and Western Art Criticism Concepts From a Cross-Cultural Perspective. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 15(2), 52-55. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/11142>  
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/11142>

### INTRODUCTION

Mr. Cai Yuanpei once said, “art is the only universal language.” As a part of contemporary Chinese culture, art criticism undoubtedly provides us with a typical text to reflect on the development of contemporary Chinese and western art at a time when the convergence and diversity of world cultures coexist. Especially comparing

the values of Chinese and western art criticism from a cross-cultural perspective is obviously the most effective perspective and approach, because the values of criticism focus on cultural thoughts, doctrines and movements first, and then rise to the inner spirit of national culture and cultural identity. The creation of artistic works must rely on the relatively independent cultural traditions of all ethnic groups. Even drawing on the creative techniques, styles and characteristics of foreign artistic works, it is a selective fusion, not a disorderly subversion or rewriting. Similarly, the writing of art criticism cannot be divorced from the national cultural tradition, and there are mature criticism programs as references. Even if one borrows the external criticism context, one cannot avoid the original criticism tradition. In this regard, contemporary Chinese and western art criticism has not only countless objective connections, but also completely different criticism logic and paradigm, and even embodies their different cultural connotations and values in the criticism category and method. Therefore, in order to present a more intuitive picture of Chinese and western art criticism in the sense of values, the author chooses three specific levels of criticism: picture and text, subjectivity and modernity for comparative study.

### 1. PICTURE AND TEXT

Picture is the core element of art criticism and the basic basis for criticism text writing. The grasp of picture information and viewing angle are directly related to the specific appearance of the text. Due to the differences in the starting point and value scale of Chinese and western picture interpretation concepts, the methods and paths of criticism are quite different in several aspects. First, when western art critics criticize local works, they start with “western mainstream values” and “western centralism”, while Chinese art critics like to embrace the world with the eyes of comparison between China and foreign

countries when paying attention to local art creation. The second is that western art criticism pays attention to the critic's personal intuitive feelings, ruling the intuitive feelings in the theoretical categories of philosophy, psychology and sociology, while Chinese art criticism focuses on the main body of criticism-the author and the works. The criticism of the author occupies a large space and sometimes runs through the whole criticism text. This comes from the repeated emphasis on the relationship between "character" and "painting". Third, western art critics like to use academic theories with sociological significance and derive a series of subject words from relevant theories. Chinese art critics are better at discussing the "goodness" and "beauty" and "ugliness" of works or authors from philosophical and aesthetic perspectives, and their sentences are mixed with Chinese and western, ancient and modern vocabulary forms. "In a sense, the method of Chinese art criticism is taste, enlightenment and understanding. The method of western art criticism is analysis, logic and dissection. Of course, this is comparatively speaking." (Li, 1999) Generally speaking, western art critics have absolute cultural confidence in the narrative perspective, while Chinese art critics have a high degree of cultural consciousness in the commentary perspective.

Before the rise of western modernism, the mainstream creation method of western painting was realism creation method. The focus of criticism naturally was on situation analysis, and the focus of formal analysis was on the basic relationship of color, line or shape. This aspect of the task makes it beyond the level of description, at the same time, it is different from the discussion of the meaning of painting image from the perspective of culture. Traditional Chinese paintings, especially literati paintings, fully express the author's emotions and emotions on the way of yearning for realism. At the end of the 19th century, the "spread of western learning to the east" also deeply involved in traditional Chinese painting. Chinese painting has been improved several times and the modeling concept of western painting has been introduced. although contemporary Chinese painting has undergone many changes in measuring its value after accepting western painting, the most basic "bone method" and "vivid charm" of Chinese painting have not changed. this may be incomprehensible from the perspective of western art theory, but this is Chinese culture. (Shang, 2018) China's grafting of western painting concepts has naturally led to a shift in critical values, and thus the context and way of western evaluation of works have appeared at the level of critical texts. At the same time, another factor that causes this phenomenon is that, at the discipline construction level, China has almost copied the modern western art discipline system, including art criticism. This makes the Chinese contemporary art criticism totally absorb the western criticism paradigm in the writing of the criticism

text, and even naturally mingle with the western art values in the criticism context, although it is far from the west in the aspect of picture observation. As a result, although the construction and development of the discipline system of contemporary Chinese art criticism have been accelerated, there are also potential risks of weakening the traditional Chinese criticism paradigm and the contemporary criticism context.

## 2. ON THE SUBJECTIVITY OF CRITICISM

Oscar Wilde compared criticism to "another kind of artistic creation." (Wilde, 2000) On the one hand, it reflects the independence of critics in the critical process; on the other hand, it also shows that critics must rely on the critical object itself to carry out their critical work, that is, "another artistic creation" must be attached to "the former artistic creation (the critical object)", which is actually the relationship between criticism and the critical subject. On this issue, contemporary Chinese and western art criticism faces basically the same situation, that is, the issue of criticism context and the way of criticism dissemination.

In the era of self-media, art criticism is moving from elite culture to mass culture, and criticism has become an art activity with extremely low threshold. Thomas Mc Evilly, an art historian, said: "Art criticism is a literary form in itself and does not completely follow any other rules. It exists among art, philosophy, philology and sociology. It is a versatile zone. Different authors can show their own personalities in different ways." (Mc Elvilly, 1996). It has become a daily life for ordinary people to enter art galleries and museums to watch exhibitions. This is undoubtedly a good thing and naturally leads to many problems. For example, as an ordinary audience who controls the media terminal, what kind of influence or even misleading will the critical remarks made have on the readers in the communication chain. However, ordinary viewers dare to express independent opinions in the face of art works under the spotlight, which is obviously a good phenomenon worthy of affirmation. It shows that ordinary viewers have extensively participated in art criticism on the Internet. This is obviously not the same thing as what professional critics consider, although critics are also constantly paying attention to the social reactions produced by their criticism texts and even the identification of the criticism subjects. However, the core issue that critics are concerned about is whether the subject he criticizes can objectively reflect the reality and conform to the current context of artistic creation, which is related to the social function of artistic criticism and the realization of critics' life value.

It can be said that art criticism has become more and more important for the development of contemporary art. Why? "Art criticism is always based on the ultimate

understanding of art. Any kind of exploration of the essential meaning of art will lead to any kind of value judgment and art criticism.” (Shang, 2003) In the classical stage of the West, when the viewer is faced with “Mona Lisa” and “David”, the viewer will have an intuitive feeling more or less. Even if the works cannot be completely or accurately interpreted, there will be universal cognition and feeling. In the post-modern era, art works have become mysterious. When you face works such as “Guernica” and “Dance”, the viewer is not confident in aesthetics while seeking novelty, and a lot of doubts pop up. “The task of the critic is to articulate their interpretation of these possibilities.” (Kassman-Tod, 2019) To contemporary art that emphasizes ideas, critics have become part of the creation process to a certain extent, and the creation obviously cannot be separated from the extensive involvement and participation of critics. Without professional art criticism, viewers can hardly have aesthetic experience, because contemporary art to a large extent relies on criticism and interpretation to show the connotation of works, although professional art criticism is sometimes wishful thinking and self-talk. From this point of view, Chinese painting criticism is obviously easier. Since ancient times, although Chinese painting art has been undergoing constant changes, its core message still emphasizes “restoring ancient ways to innovation”, that is, line, drawing language and composition should always be summarized and summarized on the basis of the maturity of ancestors. Even the core materials such as Xuan paper, ink and brush pen cannot be separated. Once separated, the works may be classified as paintings other than Chinese paintings. At the end of the last century, the “dispute over drawing language in Traditional Chinese Ink Painting” has still not ended, which fully demonstrates the Chinese people’s value identification and dependence on the concept of “Drawing Language”. Since Chinese people are so fond of “Drawing Language”, there is no doubt that “Drawing Language” has become the primary factor and standard for Chinese art criticism. This point may not be understood by western art critics, which is determined by cultural attributes and cultural genes. In fact, “Drawing Language” is a core element in the evaluation of Chinese paintings. Besides, style and aesthetic taste are unavoidable elements and key links in criticism. They are both works.

### 3. MODERNITY OF CRITICISM

When it comes to the modernity of art criticism, we should first talk about the inheritance of art criticism, which is a core proposition with strong relevance. Even if contemporary art, which regards anti-tradition as its aim, cannot avoid the category of traditional criticism in the process of criticism. Western art criticism has been dependent on philosophical propositions since

ancient times and extends to cultural and artistic trends, especially in the present and contemporary era. Often, an old or new philosophical thinking will lead to a revolutionary subversion in the art world, providing space for ideological debate and textual narration for new art criticism. Comparatively speaking, the inheritance of Chinese art criticism is more stable. Xiehe’s “Six Laws” of the Southern and Northern Dynasties, “Yi Qi” of Ni Zan in the Yuan Dynasty, and Dong Qichang’s “Theory of Southern and Northern Patriarchal Sect” in the Ming Dynasty are still the unavoidable rules and standards of Chinese art criticism today. For thousands of years, the internal logical order of Chinese painting has been firmly stable. The stability comes from the consistency of the inherent stable structure of traditional culture and the pursuit of personality values. The second is that the Chinese people’s persistent attachment to painting materials such as writing brushes, ink, paper, inkstone and so on remains unchanged. These two are naturally related to the long-term continuation of painting criticism (evaluation) standards. Even in the face of various changes and ideological trends, they are self-absorbed in this evaluation system without any subversive value reconstruction. This is a major feature of the development system of Chinese painting. On the contrary, the changes and ideological impact of western painting in the same period often fundamentally changed the trend of painting form.

There are great differences and divergences in the understanding of modernity between China and major western cultural countries, especially in the field of art criticism. Since the rise of contemporary art with the United States as its origin, the development of contemporary art has spread rapidly to all countries in the world, especially to some central cities. Contemporary art takes anti-culture and anti-tradition as its values and subversion of traditional painting as its means. This is the first time in the world’s cultural and artistic development, including China. Therefore, this trend of thought in fine arts has quickly attracted the attention and research of the fine arts circles in various countries. Among them, it took less than 20 years for China to become the most popular area of contemporary art in the world. In China, contemporary art has also won a larger share of the art market and has received strong attention from art critics. Although critical and even negative voices dominate, to a certain extent, such negative voices have instead become boosters for contemporary art to win the market. From Baudelaire in the 19th century to Roger Frye in the 20th century, and then to Greenberg, the standard bearer of modernist criticism, their philosophical stand and critical verve as classical art critics have shown clear value concern. Baudrillard, a post-modern thinker, pointed out that art criticism was originally a way to create authority. However, in a post-modern society dominated by

consumer culture, even contemporary art in the name of “avant-garde” has become a commodity, thus making the authority previously respected by art criticism disappear. Art criticism can only collude with the market and jointly create “art conspiracy.” (Baudrillard, 2005)

In the journey of western art criticism of modernity, the orthodox art concept is to control its dominant position in the art field and try to generalize its values, thus transforming the authority it represents into the only legitimate authority in the field. heretics, on the other hand, oppose the established hierarchical order (this order determines many factors such as the winning, collection, dissemination, way of being seen, market price, etc.) and they will propose new artistic concepts for improvement or confrontation in order to re-divide the sphere of influence and subvert the former’s monopoly position as the only legal artistic concept in the field. (Bourdieu, 1993) The modernity of Chinese art criticism tends to be closer to the values of western criticism. On the one hand, this is due to the influence of multiple ideological trends in art creation in the world today. On the other hand, if Chinese art is eager to go to the world and does not absorb western art values, it will not be able to obtain the recognition and promotion it deserves. We call for the establishment of localized art criticism with the “Chinese spirit” as the core, not wishing to completely return to the critical language family of the traditional society, nor is it the restart of the critical context of ancient society at present. It advocates how to activate the humanistic spirit and cultural factors of the traditional critical context, construct aesthetic experience, aesthetic standards and problem paradigms with “Chinese spirit”, and find a more reasonable and appropriate critical narrative mode in the international context. Of course, art criticism that embodies the “Chinese spirit” does not blindly open the style, terminology and paradigm of “grand narrative”. But with lofty and broad academic vision, through delicate and specific analysis, consciously take on the historical mission of cultural identity of multi-ethnic countries and enhance the international recognition of national classic arts. Calling for criticism in the “local context” is not to awaken “conservatism” (referring to conservatism), let alone to exaggerate the role and power of traditional criticism. However, from the perspective of international academic studies, we can learn from and absorb modern western excellent literary theories, and go deep into our national traditional literary theories, poetics and painting theories to seek wisdom, so as to explore the aesthetic standards of contemporary Chinese art criticism.

## CONCLUSION

For contemporary art criticism, discourse and mode are of course important, but what is more essential is the critic’s ideology and the theoretical logic behind it. At this point, we can clearly distinguish the difference of contemporary Chinese and western art criticism from the perspective of picture viewing and text writing paradigm of criticism. We can also analyze the incompatibility of the two criticism concepts from the subjective aspect of criticism. We can also clarify the trend and path of contemporary and future Chinese and western art criticism from the value of criticism modernity. We reflect on the contemporary Chinese art criticism wandering between the West and China. More importantly, we think about how to construct our own critical stance and discourse paradigm in the contemporary era. To put it bluntly, it is how to deal with the problem of effective criticism space between native land and opening up and point out a smooth way forward for contemporary Chinese art theory and criticism. Our heart knot is nothing more than that, on the one hand, we cannot avoid the existing position of the western literary theory system. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the context of traditional Chinese literary criticism and look forward to entering the present. This has caused contemporary literary critics to bear a heavy historical burden and fall into a painful entanglement of reciprocating cycles. However, China has its own tradition of art criticism and rich artistic practice. We can integrate valuable western discourses and establish an art criticism discourse system suitable for local conditions.

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